



BACKSTAGE BUZZ

Leslie West

A MAN WHO CLIMBED THE MOUNTAIN OF ROCK AND ROLL

By Robert Hooper

Leslie West hasn't changed a whole lot over the years...and neither has his taste in music. He still likes it loud.

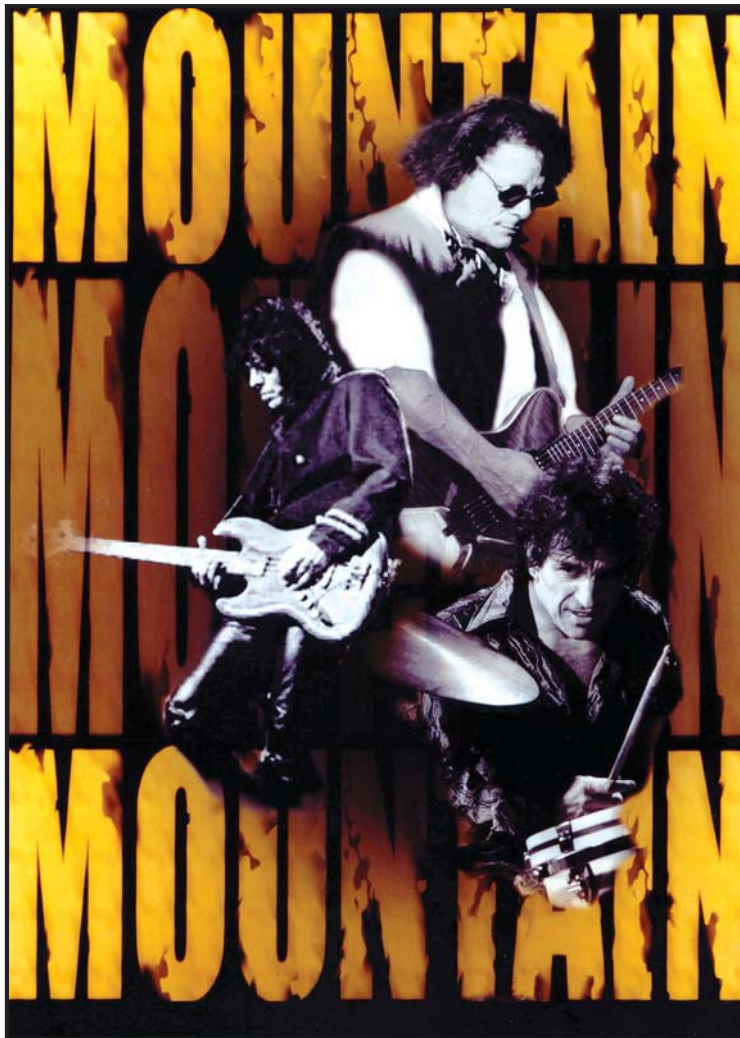
"My volume knobs go up to 11," joked West, 61, when asked about the hard-rockin' style and thunderous signature sound of his legendary group, Mountain. Never one to mince words, the native New Yorker has always been known for his bold, upfront demeanor and unabashed candor – traits that have always been a trademark of his music.

"I know it's cool for a classic rocker to say their music is heavily rooted in the blues, but I didn't exactly grow up on the Mississippi Delta. I grew up in Brooklyn and Queens listening to The Beatles and Stones. As for my greatest influences, other than my friend Mike Kravis, who I play golf with twice a week, I'd have to say Keith Richards and Eric Clapton."

West's first band was The Vagrants, a garage act that came out of Forest Hills, Queens. Although the group had a minor local hit with Otis Redding's "Respect" in 1967, the group enjoyed limited commercial success. However, the group's producer was the high-acclaimed bassist, Felix Pappalardi, who was also working at that time with one of rock's first supergroups, Cream. Pappalardi saw a diamond in the rough with West who "decided to really learn how to play" after hearing Cream in person when the famed group came to the United States.

Wishing to join hands even more closely with Pappalardi, West began jamming with his former producer. "Felix then hooked us up with Corky Laing (drums) and Steve Knight (keyboards) and the result was Mountain." As for what was behind the name, West said that it was a reflection of the band's hard-hitting sound and his rather imposing physical stature.

The group sounded pretty good...but something still wasn't right.



"Felix didn't want us to be too closely identified with Cream, so he thought we should have a keyboard player. I didn't think he was doing much and felt that the keyboards detracted from the sound I wanted." Eventually, Knight was dropped from the group. The result was rock's prototype hard rock trio, which blazed the trail forged by the disbanded CREAM.

"I didn't care about being accused of copying Cream...I loved Cream," quipped West.

Mountain debuted at the Fillmore West

in 1969, right before playing the Woodstock Festival. Needless to say, the rest is history. The explosive band stomped, bellowed, and blew the doors off every concert hall they played at for the next two and a half years. Although this was Mountain's most productive period, it was not always smooth sailing. Like two doctors in charge of a patient, West and Pappalardi argued constantly over the band's artistic direction. Nevertheless, Mountain released four bombastic albums before disbanding in late 1971. During this initial period, the group produced its signature hit, "Mississippi

Queen," which would go on to become a classic rock staple. Mountain followed up the mega-hit with another mid-chart hit, "Theme for an Imaginary Western."

After the breakup of Mountain, West and Laing looked across the Atlantic to fill the void. Joining with Cream's former bassist, the legendary Jack Bruce, a new powerful rock trio was formed: West, Bruce and Laing. The group produced some high-quality heavy metal, but for reasons never fully explained the group disbanded. Then...like a phoenix out of the ashes...Mountain was reborn with the same old lineup in 1973.

Although the band never reached the same level of stardom that it had achieved earlier, the band has stayed together ever since, seldom deviating from its classic late 60s/early 70s hard rockin' style. Sadly, the amazing Pappalardi, the creative genius who forged the group nearly forty years ago, died tragically in 1983.

These days, West continues to perform as a solo act in addition to his work with Mountain. In early 2006, he released a solo album entitled, Blue Me, on the independent Blues Bureau label. Later that year, West was inducted into the Long Island Music Hall of Fame.

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